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Poet Lore Brochures

THE RETREAT OF A
POET NATURALIST

Clara Barrus, M.D.

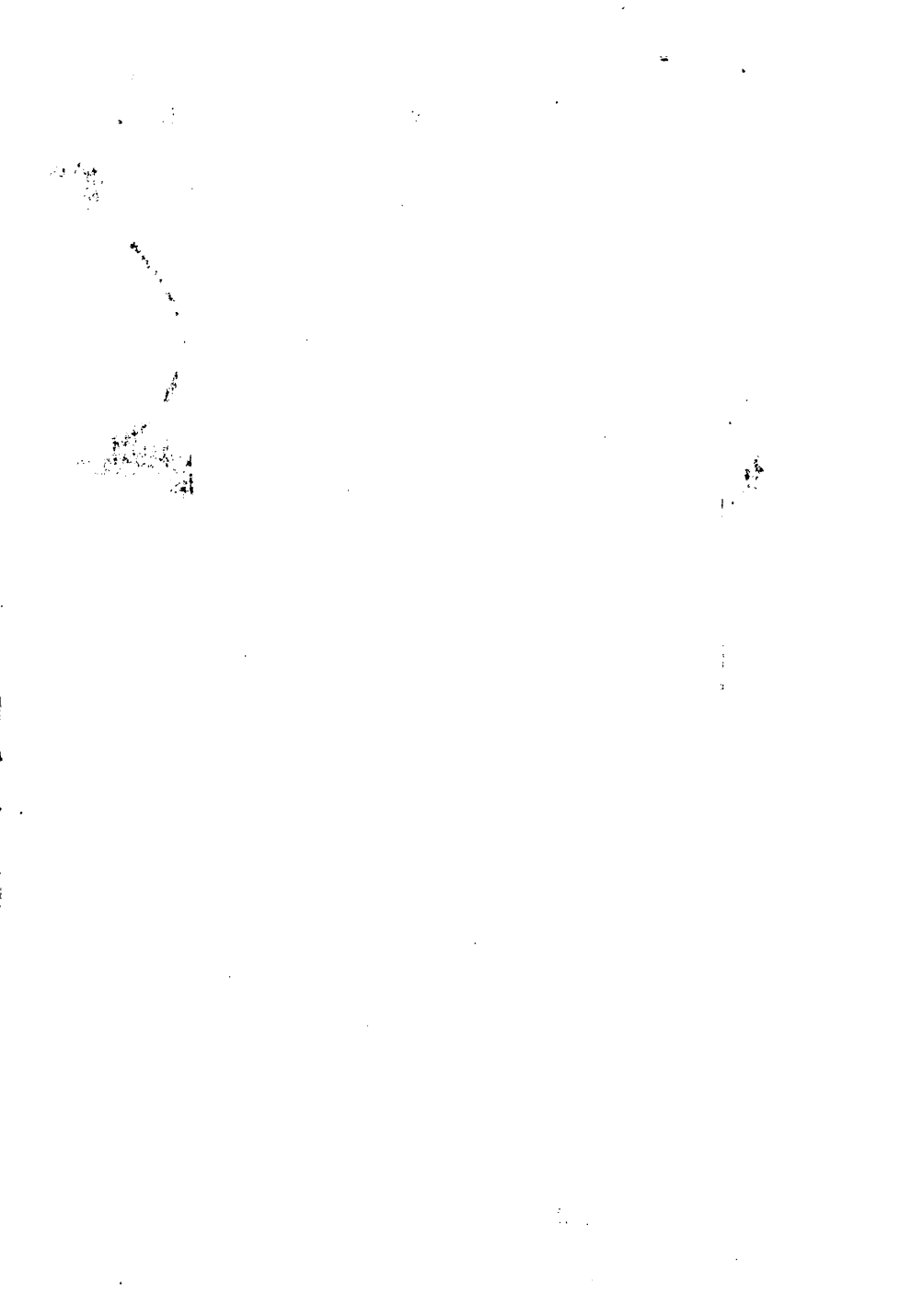
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JOHN BURROUGHS AT SLABSIDES

John Burroughs

Poet Lore

THE RETREAT OF A POET NATURALIST

BY
CLARA B. BULLS, M.D.



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THE RETREAT OF A POET NATURALIST

WE are all coming more and more to like the savor of the wild and the unconventional. Perhaps it is just this savor or suggestion of free fields and woods, both in his life and in his books, that causes so many persons to seek out John Burroughs in his retreat among the trees and rocks on the hills that skirt the western bank of the Hudson. To Mr. Burroughs more perhaps than to any other living American might be applied these words in Genesis: "See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed" — so redolent of the soil and of the hardiness and plentitude of rural things is the influence that emanates from him. His works are as the raiment of the man, and to them adheres something as racy and wholesome as is yielded by the life-giving, fertile soil.

We are prone to associate the names of our three most prominent literary naturalists: Gilbert White of England and Thoreau and John Burroughs of America, — men who have been so *en rapport* with nature that,

while ostensibly only disclosing the charms of their adorable mistress, they have at the same time subtly communicated much of their own wide knowledge of nature, and have permanently enriched our literature as well.

In thinking of Gilbert White one invariably thinks also of Selborne, his open-air parish; in thinking of Thoreau one as naturally recalls his humble shelter on the banks of Walden Pond; and it is coming to pass that in thinking of John Burroughs one thinks likewise of his hidden farm high on the wooded hills that overlook the Hudson, nearly opposite to Poughkeepsie. It is there that he has built himself a picturesque retreat, a rustic house named Slabsides. I find that to many persons the word Slabsides gives the impression of a dilapidated, ramshackle kind of a place. This impression is an incorrect one. The cabin is a well-built two-story structure, its uneuphonious but fitting name having been given it because its outer walls are formed of bark-covered slabs. "My friends frequently complain," said Mr. Burroughs to a recent visitor, "because I have not given my house a prettier name, but this name just expresses the place, and the place just meets the want that I felt for something simple, homely, secluded, — in fact, something with the bark on."

Both Gilbert White and Thoreau became identified with their respective environments almost to the exclusion of other fields. The minute observations of White, and his records of them, extending over forty years, were almost entirely confined to the district of Selborne. He tells us that he finds "that that district produces the greatest variety which is the most examined." The thoroughness with which he examined his own locality is attested by his "Natural History of Selborne," a book which has lived more than a hundred years albeit we are at a loss to comprehend the secret of its longevity. Thoreau was such a stay-at-home that he refused to go to Paris lest he miss something of interest in Concord. "I have traveled a good deal—in Concord," he says in his droll way. And one of the most delicious instances of provinciality, if one may so call it, that I ever came across is that of Thoreau's returning Dr. Kane's "Arctic Voyages" to a friend who had lent him the book, with the remark that "Most of the phenomena therein recorded are to be observed about Concord." In thinking of John Burroughs, however, the thought of the author's mountain home as the material and heart of his books does not come so readily to consciousness. For most of us

who have felt the charm of his lyrical prose both in his outdoor books and in his "Indoor Studies" were familiar with him as an author long before we knew there was a Slabsides: long before there was one, in fact, since Mr. Burroughs has been leading his readers to nature near forty years, while the picturesque refuge we are now coming to associate with him has been in existence only about nine years.

John Burroughs, our poet-naturalist, seems to have appropriated all out-of-doors for his stamping ground. He had given us in his unaffected limpid prose intimate glimpses of the hills and streams and pastoral farms of his native country; he has taken us down the Pepacton, the stream of his boyhood; we have traversed with him the "Heart of the Southern Catskills," and the valleys of the Neversink and of the Beaverkill; we have sat on the banks of the Potomac and sailed down the Saguenay; we have had a glimpse of the Blue Grass region and "A Taste of Maine Birch" (true, Thoreau gave us this, too, and other "Excursions" as well); we have walked with him the lanes of "Mellow England"; journeyed "In the Carlyle Country"; and gazed at the azure glaciers of Alaska; and doubtless shall, in time, when they have

sunk in far enough, hear from Mr. Burroughs about his recent wanderings in Florida and Jamaica, and his still more recent adventures in the Yellowstone.

John Burroughs is thus seen not to be untraveled, yet he is no wanderer. No man ever had the home feeling stronger than has he; none is more completely under the spell of a dear and familiar locality, as all his essays testify. Somewhere he has said: "Let a man stick his staff into the ground anywhere and say, 'This is home,' and describe things from that point of view, or as they stand related to that spot—the weather, the fauna, the flora—and his account shall have an interest to us it could not have if not thus located and defined."

Before hunting out Mr. Burroughs in his mountain hermitage, let us glance at his conventional abode, "Riverby," in West Park, Ulster County, New York. This has been his home for more than twenty-five years. Having chosen this place by the river, he built his house of stone, quarried from the neighboring hills, planted a vineyard on the sloping hillside, and there he has successfully combined the business of grape-culture with his pursuits and achievements as a literary naturalist. More than half his books have

been written since he has dwelt at Riverby — the earlier ones having been written when he was a clerk in the treasury department in Washington — in an atmosphere supposedly unfriendly to literary work. It was not, however, until he gave up his work in Washington, and his later position as a bank examiner in the eastern part of New York State, that he seemed to come into his own. Business life he had long known could never be congenial to him, literary pursuits alone were likewise insufficient; the long line of yeoman ancestry back of him cried out for recognition. He felt the need of closer contact with the soil, of having land to till and cultivate. This need, an ancestral one, was as imperative as his need of literary expression, an individual one. Hear what he says after having plowed in his new vineyard for the first time: "How I soaked up the sunshine today! At night I glowed all over; my whole being had had an earth bath; such a feeling of freshly-plowed land in every cell of my brain. The furrow had struck in; the sunshine had photographed it upon my soul." Later Mr. Burroughs built him a little study somewhat apart from his dwelling, to which he could retire and muse and write whenever the mood impelled him. This little one-room study,

covered with chestnut bark, is on the brow of a hill which slopes to the river; it commands an extended view of the Hudson. But even this did not meet his requirements. The formality and routine of conventional life palled on him; the expanse of the Hudson, the noise of railway and steamboat wearied him; he craved something more retired, more primitive, more homely. "You cannot have the same kind of attachment and sympathy with a great river; it does not flow through your affections like a lesser stream," he says, thinking, no doubt, of the trout brooks that thread his father's farm, of Montgomery Hollow Stream, of the Red Kill, and of others that his boyhood knew. Accordingly he cast about for some sequestered spot in which to make himself a sort of hermitage.

For several years previous to building his woodland retreat, during his excursions in the vicinity of West Park, Mr. Burroughs had lingered oftenest in these hills back of the Hudson and parallel with it, where he now makes his summer home. He had fished and rowed in Black Pond, sat by its falls in the primitive forest, sometimes with a book, sometimes with his son, or with some other hunter and fisher of congenial tastes, and on one memorable day in April, years ago,

he had tarried there with Walt Whitman. There, seated on a fallen tree, Whitman wrote this description of the place which was later printed in "Specimen Days": "I jot this memorandum in a wild scene of woods and hills where we have come to visit a waterfall. I never saw finer or more copious hemlocks, many of them large, some old and hoary. Such a sentiment to them, secretive, shaggy, what I call weather-beaten and let-alone—a rich underlay of ferns, yew sprouts, and mosses, beginning to be spotted with the early summer wild flowers. Enveloping all, the monotone and liquid gurgle from the hoarse, impetuous, copious fall—the greenish-tawny, darkly transparent waters plunging with velocity down the rocks, with patches of milk-white foam—a stream of hurrying amber, thirty feet wide, risen far back in the hills and woods, now rushing with volume—every hundred rods a fall, and sometimes three or four in that distance. A primitive forest, druidical, solitary, and savage—not ten visitors a year—broken rocks everywhere, shade overhead, thick under foot with leaves—a just palpable wild and delicate aroma."

"Not ten visitors a year"—that may have been true when Whitman described the

place, but we know it is different now. Troops of Vassar girls come to visit the hermit of Slabsides, and are taken to these falls; nature lovers, and those who only think themselves nature lovers, come from far and near; Burroughs clubs, boys' schools, girls' schools, pedestrians, cyclists, artists, authors, reporters, poets, — young and old, renowned and obscure, — from April till November seek out this lover of nature, who is a lover of human nature as well, who gives himself and his time generously to those who find him. When the friends of Socrates asked him where they should bury him he said: "You may bury me if you can *find* me." Not all who seek John Burroughs really find him; he is not one that mixes well with every newcomer; a person must either have something of Mr. Burroughs' own cast of mind, or else must be of a temperament that is capable of genuine sympathy with him, in order to find the real man. He withdraws into his shell before persons of uncongenial temperaments; to such he can never really speak — they see Slabsides, but they don't see Burroughs. Mr. Burroughs is, however, never curt nor discourteous to any one. Unlike Thoreau, who "put the whole of nature between himself and his fellows," Mr. Burroughs leads his

fellows to nature, although it is sometimes, doubtless, with the feeling that one can lead a horse to water but can't make him drink, for of all the sightseers that journey to Slab-sides there must of necessity be many that Oh and Ah a good deal, but never really get any farther in their study of nature than that. Still it can scarcely fail to be salutary even to these, to get away from the noise and the strife of everyday life in city and town, and see how sane, simple, and wholesome life is when it is lived in a sane and simple and wholesome way. Somehow it helps one to get a clearer sense of the relative value of things; it makes one ashamed of his petty potterings over trifles to witness this exemplification of the plain living and high thinking which so many preach about and so few practice.

“The thing which a man's nature calls him to do — what else so well worth doing?” asks this writer. The first thing that impresses one after glancing around this well-built cabin, with the necessities of body and soul close at hand, is a sort of vicarious satisfaction that here, at least, is one man who has known what he wanted to do and has done it. We are glad that Gilbert White made pastoral calls on his outdoor parishioners, the

birds, the toads, the turtles, the snails, and the earth-worms, although we often wonder if he evinced a like conscientiousness toward his human parishioners; we are glad that Thoreau left the manufacture of lead pencils to become, as Emerson jocosely complained, "the leader of a huckleberry party,"—glad, because these were the things their natures called them to do, and in so doing they best suited themselves and enriched their fellows,—they literally went away that they might come again to us in a closer, truer way than had they tarried in our midst. It must have been in answer to a similar imperative need of his own that John Burroughs in his later years has chosen to hie himself to the secluded yet accessible spot where his mountain cabin is built.

"As the bird feathers her nest with down plucked from her own breast," says Mr. Burroughs in one of his early essays, "so one's spirit must shed itself upon its environment before it can brood and be at all content." Here at Slabsides one feels that its master does brood and is content. It is an ideal location for a man of his temperament; it affords him the peace and seclusion he so much desires, yet is not so far away that he is shut off from human fellowship; for he is no recluse;

his human sympathies are broad and deep; unlike Thoreau, who asserts that it is "a law that you cannot have a deep sympathy with both man and nature," and that "those qualities that bring you near to the one estrange you from the other," Mr. Burroughs likes his kind; he is the most accessible, I believe, of any notable American writer — a fact which is perhaps a drawback to him in his literary work, his submission to being hunted out, often being taken advantage of, no doubt, by persons who are in no real sense nature lovers, but who go to his retreat merely to see the gentle hermit in hiding there.

After twelve years acquaintance with his books I yielded to the impulse, often felt before, to write to Mr. Burroughs and tell him what a joy his books had been to me. In answering my letter he had said: "The genuine responses that come to an author from his unknown readers, judging from my own experience, are always very welcome. It is no intrusion but rather an inspiration." A gracious invitation to make him a visit came to me later.

The visit was made in September. In less than two hours after setting out I arrived at West Park, the little station on the West Shore Railroad, where I found Mr. Bur-

roughs in waiting. The day was gray and somewhat forbidding, not so the author's greeting; his almost instant recognition and his quiet welcome made me feel that I had always known him. The feeling of comradeship that I had experienced in reading his books was realized in his presence. With market-basket on arm he started off at a brisk pace along the country road, first looking to see if I was well shod, then warning me that it was quite a climb to Slabsides. His kindly face, framed with snowy hair, was familiar to me, having seen many pictures of him. He was dressed in olive-brown clothes, "his old experienced coat" blending in color with the tree-trunks and the soil with which one felt sure it had often been in close communion.

We soon left the country road and struck into a woodland path, going up through quiet, cathedral-like woods till we came to an abrupt rocky stairway which my companion climbed with ease and agility despite his five and sixty years.

I paused to examine some mushrooms, and finding a species that I knew to be edible, began nibbling it. "Don't taste that," he said imperatively, but I laughed and nibbled away. With a mingling of anxiety and curiosity he

inquired: "Are you sure it's all right? Do you really like them? I never could, I'm sure; they are so uncanny—the gnomes or evil genii, or hobgoblins of the vegetable world—I give them a wide berth."

He pointed to a rock in the distance where he said he sometimes sat and sulked. "You sulk, and own up to it, too?" I asked. "Yes, and own up to it, too. Why not? Don't you?"

"Are there any bee-trees around here?" I ask, for I remember that in one of his essays he has said: "If you would know the delights of bee hunting and how many sweets such a trip yields besides honey, come with me some bright, warm, late September or early October day. It is the golden season of the year, and any errand or pursuit that takes us abroad upon the hills or by the painted woods and along the amber-colored streams at such a time is enough." Had I not read this invitation time and again and appropriated it to myself? Here was a September day, if not a bright one, and here were the painted woods, and somehow I felt almost aggrieved that he did not immediately propose going in quest of wild honey. Instead he only replied: "I don't know whether there are bee-trees around here now or not."

I used to find a good deal of wild honey over at a place that I spoke of casually as Mount Hymettus, and was much surprised later to find they have so put it down on the newer maps of this region. Wild honey is delectable, but I pursued that subject till I sucked it dry. I haven't done much about it these later years." So we are not to gather wild honey, I find, but what of that, am I not actually walking in the woods with John Burroughs?

Up, up, we climb, an ascent of about a mile and a quarter from the railway station. Emerging from the woods we come rather suddenly upon a reclaimed rock-girt swamp, the most of which is marked off in long green lines of celery. This swamp was formerly a lake bottom; its rich black soil, and three perennial springs near by, made Mr. Burroughs decide to drain and reclaim the soil and compel it to yield celery, lettuce, and other exceptionally fine garden produce.

Nestling under gray rocks, on the edge of the celery garden, embowered in forest trees, is the vine-covered cabin Slabsides.

What a feeling of peace and aloofness comes over one as he looks up at the rocky encircling hills! The few cabins scattered about on other rocks are at a just comfortable

distance to be neighborly, but not too neighborly. Would one be lonesome here? Aye, lonesome, but

“ Not melancholy, — no, for it is green
And bright and fertile, furnished in itself
With the few needful things that life requires;
In rugged arms how soft it seems to lie,
How tenderly protected!”

Mr. Burroughs has given to those who contemplate building a house some sound advice in his essay “The Roof Tree.” There he has said that a man makes public proclamation of what are his tastes and his manners, or his want of them, when he builds his house. He has also said that if we can only keep our pride and vanity in abeyance and forget that all the world is looking on, we may be reasonably sure of having beautiful houses. Tried by his own test, we find that he has no reason to be ashamed of his tastes nor of his manners when *Slabsides* is critically examined. Blending with its surroundings, it is coarse, strong, and substantial without; within it is snug and comfortable; its wide door bespeaks hospitality; its low, broad roof, protection and shelter; its capacious hearth, cheer; all its appointments for the bodily needs bespeak simplicity and frugality; and its books and

pictures, and the conversation of the host — are they not there for the needs that bread alone will not supply?

“Mr. Burroughs, why don’t you *paint* things?” asked a little boy of four who had been spending a happy day at Slabsides, but who, at nightfall, while nestling in Mr. Burroughs’s arms, seemed suddenly to realize that this rustic home is very different from anything he had seen before. “I don’t like things painted, my little man; that is just why I came up here — to get away from paint and polish — just as you liked to have on your overalls today and play on the grass, instead of keeping on that pretty blue dress your mamma wanted you to keep clean.” “Oh!” said the child in a knowing tone, and one felt that he understood. But that is another story.

The time of which I am speaking, that gray September day — what a memorable day it was! How cheery the large, low room looked when Mr. Burroughs replenished the smoldering fire! “I sometimes come up here even in winter, build a fire and stay for an hour or more, with long, sad, sweet thoughts and musings,” he said. He is justly proud of the huge stone fireplace and chimney which he helped to construct himself; he also helped

to hew the trees and build the house. "What joy went into the building of this retreat! I never expect to be so well content again." Then musing, he added: "It is a comfortable, indolent life I lead here; I read a little, write a little, and dream a good deal. Here the sun does not rise so early as it does down at Riverby. 'Tired nature's sweet restorer' is not put to rout so soon by the screaming whistles, the thundering trains, and the necessary rules and regulations of well-ordered domestic machinery. Here I really 'loaf and invite my soul.' Yes, I am often very melancholy and hungry for companionship—not in the summer months, no, but in the quiet evenings before the fire, with only Silly Sally to share my long long thoughts; she is very attentive, but I doubt if she notices when I sigh. She doesn't even heed me when I tell her that ornithology is a first-rate pursuit for men, but a bad one for cats. I suspect that she studies the birds with even greater care than I do, for now I can get all I want of a bird and let him remain in the bush, but Silly Sally is a thorough-going ornithologist; she must engage in all the feather splittings that the ornithologists do, and she isn't satisfied until she has thoroughly dissected and digested her material, and has all the dry bones of the subject laid bare."

We sat before the fire while Mr. Burroughs talked of nature, of books, of men and women whose lives or books, or both, have closely touched his own—chiefly of Emerson and of Whitman he talked, the men to whom he seems to owe the most, the two whom most his soul has loved.

He told of his first bite into Emerson—it was like tasting a green apple—not that Emerson was unripe, but that Burroughs wasn't ripe for him. A year or two later he tasted again. "‘Why, this tastes good,’ I said, and took a bigger bite." Then he proceeded to devour everything of Emerson's that he could find. "I was dominated by him. I unconsciously imitated his style. I was Jonah in the whale's belly—the great fish swallowed me. As soon as I began to realize this, I said to myself, ‘See here, this will never do, I must be myself—not a feeble imitation of any one, not even of Emerson.’" It was then that he began to write on outdoor themes to see, he said, if he could get the Emersonian musk out of his garments. He buried his garments in the earth, as it were, that the earth might draw out this rank suggestion of Emerson. The "Emersonian musk" must have been pretty strong in his early essays, notably in one called "Ex-

pression," which was published anonymously in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1860. Poole's Index attributed this essay to Emerson, and even as acute a critic as Professor Hill of Harvard has done the same — the latest edition of Hill's *Rhetoric*, I find, continues to quote from this essay by Mr. Burroughs, crediting it to Emerson. Within the past year, however, Professor Hill has been informed of this error, and says it shall be corrected in later editions.

As soon as Mr. Burroughs began to write on outdoor themes, on things dear and familiar to him, he found that he had some things of his own to say, and, to his great surprise, he found that readers liked to hear him say them in his own way.

"I remember the first time I saw Emerson," he continued, musingly; "it was at West Point during the June examination of the cadets. Emerson had been appointed by President Lincoln as one of the board of visitors. I had been around there in the afternoon and had been peculiarly interested in one man whose striking face and manner kept challenging my attention. I did not hear him speak, but saw him going about with a silk hat, much too large, pushed back on his head; his sharp eyes peering into everything — curious about

everything. 'Here,' said I to myself, 'is a countryman who has got away from home, and who intends to see all that is going on.' Such an alert, interested air! That evening a friend came to me, and in a voice full of awe and enthusiasm said, 'Emerson is in town!' Then I knew who the alert, sharp-eyed stranger was. That evening we went to the meeting and met our hero, and the next day we walked and talked with him. He seemed glad to get away from those old fogies and chat with us younger men. I remember carrying his valise to the boat landing—I was in the seventh heaven of delight.

"I saw him several years later," he continued, "soon after 'Wake Robin' was published; he mentioned it and said: 'Capital title, capital!' I don't suppose he had read much besides the title.

"The last time I saw him," he said with a sigh, "was at Holmes' seventieth birthday breakfast, in Boston. But then his mind was like a splendid bridge with one span missing; he had—what is it you doctors call it?—aphasia, yes, that is it—he had to grope so for his words. But what a serene, god-like air! He was like a plucked eagle tarrying in the midst of a lot of lesser birds. He would sweep the assembly with that searching glance

as much as to say: 'What is all this buzzing and chirping about?' Holmes was as brilliant and scintillating as ever — sparks of wit would greet every newcomer, flying out just as the sparks fly from that log there. Whittier was there, too, looking nervous and unhappy, and as if very much out of his element. But he stood next to Emerson, prompting his memory and supplying the words his voice refused to utter. When I was presented, Emerson said in a slow, questioning way: 'Burroughs — Burroughs?' 'Why, thee knows *him*,' said Whittier, jogging his memory with some further explanation; but I doubt if he then remembered anything about me."

It was not such a leap from the New England writers to Whitman as one might imagine. Mr. Burroughs spoke of Emerson's prompt and generous indorsement of the first edition of "Leaves of Grass": "I give you joy of your free brave thought. I have great joy in it." This, and much else, Emerson had written in a letter to Whitman. The latter had shown the letter to Dana, who had said: "It is the charter of an Emperor!" Whitman's head was undoubtedly a little turned by praise from such a source, and he did what he should not have done without first obtaining permission, he published Em-

erson's letter in his next edition of the Leaves. This disturbed Emerson, but in spite of all that has been said on the subject, Emerson and Whitman remained firm friends to the last.

"Whitman was a child of the sea," said Mr. Burroughs, "nurtured by the sea, cradled by the sea; he gave one the same sense of invigoration and of illimitableness that we get from the 'husky-voiced sea.' He never looked so much at home as when on the shore—his gray clothes, gray hair, and far-seeing blue-gray eyes, blending with the surroundings. And his thoughts—the same broad sweep, the elemental force and grandeur, and all-embracingness of the impartial sea!

"Whitman never hurried," Mr. Burroughs continued, "he always seemed to have infinite time at his disposal. He often used to take Sunday breakfasts with us in Washington, but he was always late. I don't know that he was ever known to get there on time; but when he did come it was with such a cheery, fresh, wholesome air. He radiated health and good humor. This is what made his work among the sick soldiers in Washington of such inestimable value. Every one that came into personal relations with him felt his rare compelling charm."

It was all very well this talk about the poets, but climbing "break-neck stairs" on our way thither had given the guest an appetite and the host as well; and these appetites had to be appeased by something less transcendental than a feast of reason. Mr. Burroughs knew this; and, scarcely interrupting his engaging monologue, went about his preparations for dinner, doing things deftly and quietly, all unconscious that there was anything peculiar in this sight to a spectator. And such a dinner! It was found that the host can not only write charming books, and successfully grow grapes, but that he can also cook a dinner that would do credit to an Adirondack guide — and when one has said this, what more need one say?

"If all dainty fingers their duties might choose,
Who would wash up the dishes and polish the shoes?" —

Silly Sally, the "fireside Sphinx," not offering her services, except to dispose of certain chicken bones in her own way, host and guest washed and wiped the dishes, weighing Schopenhauer, Amiel, and Mæterlinck in the balance at the same time.

It was here that Mr. Burroughs told his guest about Anne Gilchrist, the talented,

noble-hearted English woman whose ready acceptance and splendid enthusiasm of Whitman's message bore fruit in her penetrating criticism of Whitman which stands today unrivaled by anything that has been written concerning the Good Gray Poet.

Like most of Mr. Burroughs' readers I am very fond of his little poem "Waiting," and, like most of them, I told him so, on seeing him seated before his fire after the work was done, with folded hands and face serene, — a living embodiment of the faith and trust expressed in those familiar verses. It would seem natural that he should write such a poem after the heat of the day, after his ripe experience, after success has come to him, — it is the lesson we expect one to learn on reaching his age, and learning how futile is the fret and urge of life, how infinitely better is the attitude of trust that what is our own will gravitate to us in obedience to eternal laws — but it seemed strange to learn that this poem was written by Mr. Burroughs when he was a young man, life all before him, his prospects in rather a dubious and chaotic condition, his own aspirations then seeming likely to come to naught — but such, he told me, was the case when "Waiting" found itself on paper.

“I have lived to prove it true,” he said, — “that which I but vaguely felt when I wrote the lines. Our lives are all so fearfully and wonderfully shot through with the very warp and woof of the universe, past, present, and to come! No doubt at all that our own, — that which our souls crave and need, does gravitate toward us, or we toward it. ‘Waiting’ has been successful,” he added, “not on account of its poetic merit, but for some other merit or quality. It puts in simple and happy form some common religious aspirations, without using the religious jargon. People write me from all parts of the country that they treasure it in their hearts; that it steadies their hand at the helm; that it is full of consolation for them. It is because it is poetry alloyed with religion that it has this effect. Poetry alone would not do this; neither would a prose expression of the same religious aspirations do it, for we often outgrow the religious views and feelings of the past. The religious thrill, the sense of the Infinite, the awe and majesty of the universe, are no doubt permanent in the race, but all expressions of these feelings in creeds and forms addressed to the understanding, or exposed to the analysis of the understanding, are as transient and fitting as the leaves of

the trees. My little poem is vague enough to escape the reason, sincere enough to go to the heart, and poetic enough to stir the imagination."

The power of accurate observation, of dispassionate analysis, of keen discrimination and insight that Mr. Burroughs's readers are so familiar with in his writings about nature, books, men, and life in general, is here seen to extend to self-analysis as well—a rare gift—a power that makes his opinions carry conviction, because the reader feels that the author is not intent on upholding any theory, but only on seeing things as they are and reporting them as they are.

A steady rain had set in early in the afternoon, effectually drowning my hopes of a longer woodland walk that day, but I was then, and many a time since then, have been well content that it was so. I learned less of woodland lore, but more of the woodland philosopher.

We spoke of the Harriman Alaska Expedition in 1889, of which Mr. Burroughs was a guest. He seemed rather dissatisfied with his contribution to the elegant book about the expedition that was subsequently published. "A thing has to stay in my consciousness a while," he explained, "and grow and develop

there before I can reproduce it on paper. If I could have waited six months or more, until I felt moved to write, I might have brought forth something more creditable; but they made me go about it deliberately, before I had carried it long enough, before I had made it my own. That is not my way of writing — I go to Nature for love of her and the book follows or not, as the case may be.”

In such converse passed the hours of a memorable day in that humble retreat on the wooded hills,

“Away from the clank of the world,”

and in the company of the poet-naturalist, John Burroughs. So cordial had my host been, so gracious the admission to his home and hospitality, that I left the little refuge with a feeling of enrichment I shall cherish while life lasts — I had sought out a favorite author, I gained a friend.

Wolk autograph
John Burroughs

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